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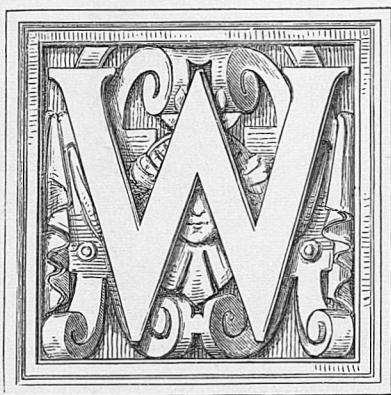
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TENDENCIES OF ART IN AMERICA.



WE have reached a point where it is possible to form some estimate of the tendencies most apparent in American art, although it is always difficult to judge of contemporary events with entire justness. The difficulty arises mainly from the fact that we can rarely say with precision where an era of development begins and where it ends; for the eras merge imperceptibly into one another, like the colors of the spectrum. This has been especially the case in the history of our art. Even when the artistic activity was at its highest, the propelling impulse was too feeble or transient, or the results too spasmodic, to enable us to forecast any opinion of the drift in any given direction, while the whole organization of society was in such a forma-

tive and nebulous condition that it was no less hard to discern what influence it in turn might have on the art of the country. Artists of unquestionable ability, in some cases of genius, have appeared from time to time; but, although essential to the growth of our art, the effect they produced was apparently so slight and evanescent, so much more like the scattering shots of a guerilla warfare than the massed fire of brigades directed to a definite end, that only the closest scrutiny would have been able to detect the sum of their efforts and calculate its force.

But now it seems otherwise. This hesitating and preparatory period is giving place to organized effort, definite aims, and concerted action, and to methods which, if not always commendable, are yet influential motors in an era of progress and change. With a rapidity which hardly has an example in the history of æsthetics, the popular mind responds to the new movement of American art, and everything indicates that we are indeed passing from one era to another.

But while we see these signs in the horizon we are far from asserting or believing that all are of equal importance, or that we can definitely distinguish in all cases the permanent from the transient, and the really valuable from the trivial. The utmost honesty, the most unbiased judgment, is liable to error in estimating contemporary persons and events. What seems to us important now may seem of very slight value to him who shall look back to it in time to come.

Nor would we disparage what has already been done in our art by speaking of the present tendencies as reformatory; we should rather consider them as supplementary, or as new steps in the direction of progress, for we cannot forget that the preliminary stages in American art have been of absolute importance to its future, and therefore command the respect due to a

prime factor in a great scheme, aside from the circumstance that some of its founders have been endowed with great ability, and sometimes even with genius.

It is thought by some that the peculiar conditions of society and government in the New World also imply a new order of intellectual growth. This we are not prepared to accept as yet clearly demonstrated. It seems to us instead, that the unswerving, determinate rigor of the laws which direct the development of the race is emphasized rather than weakened by the history of the arts in the United States. We may go over the different steps more rapidly than elsewhere, but nevertheless they must all be trod as other people have trod them before us. It is only as we recognize that we are not inventing new race laws, but testing the power of a universal and irrevocable code under new conditions, that we are able to trace, in a rational manner, the forces at work in this country. We are testing the adaptive elasticity, but at the same time the inexorable despotism, of laws from which we cannot escape if we would.

Thus swayed by a system which creates wants in our nature and then urges us to exert our powers by seeking to gratify them, we share with our predecessors that yearning after beauty which comes from a universal instinct of the race to place itself in harmony with the order of the universe. This it is which forms the essence of art. That is always the same, while the methods for giving expression to this want vary with age and race. And yet even this apparent variety of expression is governed by laws, and proceeds upon certain lines of action, which we are just beginning to perceive and formulate. First come the feeble, fluttering attempts at articulate language; then imitation of those whose art has the precedence in point of time; then individuality of style or art language; and then the symmetrical equilibrium and reposeful power of a great national life exuberant with thought, colossal in imagination, and wielding styles of expression adequate to the demand of the age. Then culminates the art of a people, and after that conventionalism and decadence succeed.

The first efforts of our art have involved a rapid succession or quasi union of the first two stages of art progress, doubtless due to the fact that we began our national history under different conditions from those of other nations, bringing with us an already well developed civilization to the wilderness of an unexplored continent. We are now floating on the full tide of the imitative period. Theories aside, art consists of æsthetics and the language or style that gives it concrete form. It is of little use to have great thoughts, lofty aspirations, or beautiful ideals, if one lacks the language that makes them forcible and attractive. It is, therefore, not so strange that so much stress is laid by some on the matter of style. Imagination is indisputably the first thing in art; the creative faculty dominates all others; it is the quality which is found pre-eminent in art work that endures. But in order to come within the domain of art, it must have adequate forms of expression, whether with simple line, or *chiaroscuro*, or color, or all combined; and the proper, effective use of these media based on intelligent observation is what constitutes style.

In the early stages of a national art style is borrowed, and great importance is placed upon its culture, and it is then indeed liable to be elevated by the opinion of the day to the first rank. Materials and methods are then over-estimated. But in time, when the artist of the culminating period arrives, teeming with thought and urged on by a rush of imaginative force, he places less importance on style. By the laws of inheritance he seems born equipped with weapons which his predecessors were forced to borrow from other nations; more concerned with what he has to say than how he shall say it, he yet says it in a way that is grand and his own. He is the genius, he is the master, the founder of schools, the winner of immortality. He it is who brings fire down from heaven, and makes the world richer with the heart's blood he has given to the pursuit of the arts. He has copied no style, it is true, but for that very reason others shall copy his.

There may be a great art in which style is of more importance than what it undertakes to say, but never the greatest art. Now this is pre-eminently an age of style so far as concerns

art. The great schools of France and England have culminated after ages of preparatory evolution and the way to new schools is now being laid in those countries, through a purgatory of formalism, conventional platitudes, and unimaginative realism. In France, Italy, and Spain Fortuny left behind him a heritage of style. Ideas or grand aspirations we nowhere see indicated in his works, but he was one of the grandest masters of style of modern times. When Delacroix and Turner, and the great school of their contemporaries, had done their work, Fortuny inaugurated an exceedingly brilliant, but lower order of art, whose weakness at once becomes evident in the works of his disciples. The same tendency toward emphasizing methods, either as a sign of promise or of decadence, is apparent in the literary art of the period. In the fiction and poesy of the English-speaking races we find at this juncture little of the vastness, the energy, the terrific passion, the sublime questionings of the problems of destiny, which have characterized the literature of past ages, but rather a dealing with the surface of society, or the foibles of fashionable life, instead of the agonies of a seething, tempest-tossed humanity. So far as our own country is concerned this is both natural and desirable, for with the exception of Hawthorne, Poe, Emerson, Longfellow, and two or three other authors, our literature, until recently, has been neither strong nor original in point of style.

And thus it is also with our art at the present time. We have had great painters in portraiture and landscape, but the country was not yet ready for a general æsthetic movement, and their style and their influence seemed to die with them. A change seems, however, to have arrived at last. The time is coming when the nation, settling down to a consciousness of stability and sure of a grand and prosperous future, with a homogeneous race evolved from the many that have landed on our shores, strong in the full ripeness of maturity, and confidently reaching out after the unattained, shall be moved by great thoughts and aspire to utter them in the language of art, but in a dialect of its own, racy with the flavor of the Western world. The artists shall then appear who will give expression to those aspirations, but before that time comes, and before those artists are born, the prosody and syntax of the art language they are to speak must be formulated and learned by their predecessors. In other words, before the nation can create enduring schools of art, it must know how to create them, it must understand method or style. And that is exactly the point where we stand to-day: the age of style is upon us, and, as we have already suggested, such an age is liable to be a period of imitation, and we may also add of materialism. So we learn from history, and we see it illustrated in our own time. The young art of a new people necessarily borrows its methods, too often also its ideas, as children imitate their elders. While an art which concerns itself chiefly with the question of materials necessarily deals with things of sense, it is realistic, satisfied with the surfaces of the objects it represents, and not aspiring after a conception of the spiritual and the ideal. The marbles of Ægina are wonderful examples of realistic art, for their creators were mastering the mysteries of style and the knowledge of external things; but how inferior are they to the Elgin marbles, which succeeded, and could not have been created without them!

It is not surprising that some of the enthusiastic young artists who have recently imported foreign styles from the ateliers of Paris and Munich into American art should be fanatic on the question of *technique*. They have a mission to perform, they are teaching us the importance of technical knowledge in art, and all such men must be more or less fanatics; but while they are indispensable to the art of the future, their admirers are not obliged to be fanatical as well; dogmatism has no place in such questions, and they should remember that mastery in style is simply a means, and not an end,—in skilful hands a weapon, but not the deed for which the weapon was made,—while the styles that are to give immortality to our artists will not be borrowed, but indigenous. This period of our art, so far as painting is concerned, began several years before its drift was strongly perceptible, quietly and unostentatiously. Some fifteen years ago the Boston correspondents of the New York press began to allude to the art school and work of Mr. William M. Hunt. He had already been for some time a rising power,

and was until his recent untimely death the most considerable individuality in contemporary American art. At the same time his career most thoroughly illustrates the truth of the foregoing reflections. Mr. Hunt has been an influence among us, not so much because of the originality of his art as on account of the force of his personal character, which, in a city where personality has a charm unusual in the United States, conveyed the impression of genius, gave weight to whatever he said and did, and collected around him a circle of admirers who were bound in tacit league to fight his battles, too often with a zeal that was liable to be unjust in the consideration of other artists and schools.

Another reason for the remarkable influence Mr. Hunt has exerted is owing to the fact that, when the hour had arrived for a new period in our art, the first step in that direction was taken by him. We refer to the question of *technique*. Whether consciously or not, Mr. Hunt seems to have been the first to make the deliberate attempt to import foreign methods into our art. Not that he was the first of our painters to study abroad and to imitate foreign styles, for from the time of West to our day many of our artists have done the same. But their power has been less, or they have soon emancipated themselves from foreign influence, and formed styles of their own, or the time was not yet ripe for so distinct a recognition in this country of the importance of technical excellence. Mr. Hunt had the good fortune to introduce here the methods of one of the greatest masters of modern times, Jean François Millet. The superb style of that artist Mr. Hunt could reproduce for us, as he did, in numerous excellent portraits and compositions, and repeat some of his maxims; but the soul of the art of Millet cannot be imitated here until men as originally great as he are born among us. Still, we undoubtedly owe a debt of gratitude to Mr. Hunt for starting a movement of such importance in America, even if style be only a means to an end, although what an indispensable means!

The conditions for the success of Mr. Hunt's undertaking could have been found nowhere else in America at that time so well as in Boston. Compact, strongly swayed by the *esprit du corps* of cliques, intensely self-appreciative, and until quite lately homogeneous in population, this city has always loyally stood up for the opinions or the heroes it adopts; therefore we say no better place could have been found in America wherein to start a new æsthetic movement.

Mr. Hunt's influence has been apparent in two ways, of which one has been to gather around him a flock of enthusiastic admirers, who have faithfully imitated the style of Millet at second hand, as suggested through the works of their leader. They have thus played an important part; and if none of them have been geniuses,—for genius rarely condescends to imitate, especially at second-hand, but is bound to assert itself in original creations,—they have at least done good service in publishing the gospel of style. Mr. Hunt's influence has been also evident, in stimulating a crowd of art students to cross the Atlantic to study the *technique* of modern European art in its strongholds. We think we are not mistaken in attributing one of the most noticeable phenomena of our contemporary art to his example and his precepts.

But if Boston was the place in which the new era could best make a beginning, we must frankly admit that in New York—more cosmopolitan and catholic in its views on all questions than Boston—this period of our art seems destined to find a more congenial field for its growth and development. Until the advent of Mr. Duveñeck from Munich, and the active efforts exerted to gain for his paintings the recognition of the leaders of the Boston art circles, it was nearly impossible for any but modern French art, or the imitation of it, to gain a foothold in certain circles of that city, while in New York we see the graduates of the studios of Paris and London, Munich and Rome, finding ample scope for their methods, and actually working together for the establishment of art schools and exhibitions that should give expression to their respective views. If too intolerant of the good work our artists have formerly produced, they have at least enjoyed and practised a certain degree of charity towards each other which can afford to be enlarged as they become surer of their ground. Intolerance in the consideration of art questions is the most common of all forms of that evil, while it is never more offensive, when one considers

the infinite number of truths in nature that may be and are to be revealed by art, and the fact that it is only as artists see and interpret those truths in their own way that they can possibly add anything of really permanent value to the intellectual progress and happiness of mankind.

By far the larger number of those who are expounding the importance of *technique* in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York have been the pupils of foreign masters. But here and there painters like Mr. George Fuller of Boston, for whose abilities we entertain a great respect, and Messrs. Winslow Homer, R. Swain Gifford, and A. H. Wyant of New York, suggest that the time is approaching when artists native born and native bred shall give us works of genius in every respect sprung from the soil, and yet approximating or surpassing foreign works in technical excellence. In alluding to the last two we are reminded of the gradual transition of our distinctively American school of landscape from the powerfully imaginative, although technically weak landscapes of Cole, to those of Church and McEntee, and then to those of J. Appleton Brown and W. Allan Gay, which is yet more strikingly exemplified by the sliding scale of style followed by Mr. Inness. His early landscapes are characterized by a careful finish, that shows him to be the unmistakable associate of the American landscape painters of that period; while from that time he has gradually but steadily proceeded to greater dash and breadth of handling, until his work may at present be almost allied with the massive style of Duprez and the impressionism of Corôt. While conceding an unusual degree of original ability to Mr. Inness, we cannot avoid the thought that his travels among foreign galleries have, unconsciously perhaps to himself, modified his method of using colors, and have thus added him to the rank of those who have hastened the period of style in American art. So far as relates to choice of subject, the present movement, however, is not so much towards progress in landscape painting as in the study of the human figure; and this is indeed a great and noble step in advance, for, with the exception of a few rarely good portrait-painters, our art has been astonishingly weak in dealing with the highest subject that offers itself to the artist. The study of the human form divine from the life has never before received such attention in this country; and until a knowledge of the figure has become almost traditionally familiar to our artists, it is impossible for us to hope for any important general results in either *genre* or historical painting. Nor can such art be thoroughly national or original until sufficient time has elapsed to imbue our artists, whether painters or sculptors, with the characteristics of the mental and physical race types which are being evolved on this continent. But while laying such stress upon the importance of these studies, we would not be understood to imply that finished compositions must, as a matter of course, be always literally painted in every detail from the life. Memory and imagination should be permitted to enter into the conception and completion of such works no less than realism pure and simple. The greatest works of the masters of past ages have been based upon this triple union of forces. But, on the other hand, the imagination should create only after the most careful study of nature.

The establishment of art schools in many of our leading cities, affording not only ample opportunities of drawing from casts, but also from the living model, has been more rapid than could possibly be the case except under the most absolute monarchy, which can ordain events by the fiat of its arbitrary will, or in exactly such a congeries of republics as ours, in which each State and each individual municipality can further such institutions within its own limits entirely upon the volition of its own citizens. The extraordinary faculty of the Americans for organizing has never been more apparent than in the rapid and successful opening of art schools in numerous cities across the whole continent,—east and west must be added, for the tendency towards art instruction does not yet seem to have reached farther south than Baltimore and Cincinnati.

Established upon the plan of foreign art schools, there is yet nothing especially American about these institutions, unless that they are, with the exception of the Normal Art School of Massachusetts, unlike most foreign art schools, entirely dependent for foundation and support

upon popular subscriptions or private munificence. In the case of the school of the Artists' League in New York, even such endowment is wanting, and yet, through the enthusiasm of the younger portion of the community, it has become entirely self-supporting.

If the sums were computed which have been expended within a very few years in the endowment of our numerous art schools and galleries, and the erection of such elegant structures as the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Academies of Philadelphia and New Haven, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, or the Corcoran Gallery, they would be found fairly to rival the sums lavished upon art education in London, Munich, or Paris during the same period.

The wide extent over which these institutions are scattered, while it will undoubtedly tend to diffuse a knowledge of art more rapidly, and by the diverse national types it reaches must lead to a greater breadth and variety of characterization in our art, will, on the other hand, also retard the growth of a powerfully individual and distinctive national art. By this rapid diffusion of æsthetical knowledge over the country, an abundance of art will be the result; but the quality will probably not be great nor enduring until some city, perhaps not yet founded, shall arise to be the permanent metropolis of the intellectual activity of the Republic.

S. G. W. BENJAMIN.

(To be concluded.)

